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The Cost of Living - Experiencing Subalterneity in *The God of Small Things*

Mithun Bhattacharjya, M.A.

Of Inferior Rank

‘Subaltern’ in its etymological meaning (of inferior rank) is one of the most intriguing and frequently used terms that the postcolonial thinkers and historiographers relentlessly tussle with. “In postcolonial and related fields ‘subaltern’ refers to persons socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure”.¹ The term was first used by Antonio Gramsci “to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to hegemonic power”². The term gained popularity through the use of it by the Subaltern Studies group formed by Ranajit Guha.

The Subaltern Studies

The subaltern studies project aimed at dismantling the recorded, official historiography of the ‘elite’ in the South Asian region, and at upholding the ‘little’ narratives and history of the oppressed, marginalised classes who have been effaced from the nationalistic historiography, constructed by the ‘elite’.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, on the other hand, questions in her influential essay “*Can The Subaltern Speak?*” the essentializing effort of the Subaltern Studies group by including the issue of the women. She declares that the women as ‘gendered subaltern’ cannot speak on their own. So, whatever the matrix of the signification of the term ‘subaltern’ is, in the field of academic analysis, it can be said, quite safely and reasonably, that subalterneity is, after all, a subjective position. It designates the people living in the lower

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scale of the social hierarchy. In its wider signification 'subaltern' refers to the weak and oppressed section of the society. In the political, social as well as familial domains these people experience subjugation, humiliation and even torture at its extreme.

Indian Situation

In India where caste based discrimination, religious antagonism, class consciousness and economic disparity prevail, subaltern state of being can be discerned at different levels of existence. Added to all these, there is a strong gender based discrimination in India over the ages. In the words of Spivak, the women constitute what she calls the 'gendered subaltern'.

The Place of *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* very truthfully and poignantly depicts the subalterns being dehumanized by the dominant hegemonic ideology (in this case the upper caste, male dominated one). In her novel subalterneity is two fold : one is the 'gendered subalterneity' (represented by Ammu, mainly) and the other is the social subalterneity (represented by the untouchable, Dalit Velutha).

The novel is a wonderful exposition of the Indian social reality. Amidst all the hoopla about progress, secularism, equal right and justice the novel actually, shows how these ideologies are jeopardised, and how the subalterns (female and dalit) are fated to a marginalised and constricted life of humiliation and torture.

Narrated from the Viewpoint of a Female Character

The God of Small Things is narrated mostly from the point of view of Rahel. Rahel is one of the 'two-egg twins' of Ammu. Estha – Esthappen was her twin brother who was older by eighteen minutes. One particular tragic incident in their childhood changed the course of their lives altogether. They were exposed to incidents, they were not supposed to, at their age. History revealed itself to them, in a most despairing manner, through the network of politics of the adult world. After the incident, they were separated from each other for long twenty three years. After all these years Estha who was transported to Calcutta, comes back to Ayemenem in Kerala where actually, the incident happened. The twins meet each other and the narrative starts in flash back through the stream of consciousness of Ammu, Rahel and Estha. Ammu appears in the novel to be the ill-fated girl child of Pappachi and Mammachi. Chacko is her brother. Among the other important characters there are Baby Kochamma, Pappachi's younger sister, comrade K.N.M Pillai and Velutha, the untouchable.

Boy and the Girl Distinction

There is a great disparity in the treatment of Ammu and Chacko by the family members. While Chacko is sent to Oxford for higher education, investment for Ammu's education is considered to be a waste of money. Not only that, there is not much initiative as to arranging the marriage for Ammu. Frustrated, she meets a Bengali man in a marriage ceremony of one of her relatives in Calcutta, and decides to marry him. But, this marriage was frustrating, again. Her husband comes out to be a drunkard and a mean-minded person who even wants Ammu to have a sexual relationship with his boss in the tea estate so that he can retain his job. After this incident, Ammu comes to Ayemenem with her two children— Estha and Rahel to her father's home but, without any welcome. Their life in Ayemenem, is

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marred with humiliation, segregation and torture. Here, gradually, Ammu feels an irresistible attraction for Velutha, the untouchable carpenter. This 'illicit' relationship of her with Velutha is beyond the social 'laws' and they are eventually punished for that. But the severity of the punishment costs huge—it takes away life, love and childhood from the children. According to Elleke Boehmer: "In *The God of Small Things*, a tale of damaged lineages and dispossession, it is predictably in relation to the smaller, peripheral spaces that the lives of women, children and dalits are plotted"³.

Exploring the Marginalized Status of Women

Among the variegated themes that Roy's *GST* explores, the marginalised, helpless predicament of the women is what draws the attention of the readers at once. In a male chauvinistic social set up, women are often rendered vulnerable. The dominant male ideology subjugates them, and puts some normative and discriminatory 'laws' before them to follow without questioning ; it makes these 'laws' institutionalised, and enforce them through institutions like family, society, politics or administration. Spivak's comment in this regard needs special mention:

"It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow...."⁴

In every social institution and context, Ammu and her two children are victims of discrimination, humiliation and injustice.

The family is, quite contrary to the belief, the most culpable institution perpetrating injustice to the women. In the novel, we see that Ammu gets the severest blow from her kith and kin. From her childhood (or girlhood, like Taslima Nasrin's?) Ammu experiences the discrimination. She does not get equal opportunity of education like her brother. To her father "a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl" (*GST*-38). But the same father provides money for Chacko for his higher education at Oxford. The precarious situation that Ammu is in, can be understood, through an understanding of the relational positioning of who dictates whom. Within the family the divorcee woman has no position; she is out of place, belonging nowhere. A woman can have any value only in relation to a man; she herself is nothing.

In her introduction to *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir writes:

“(Thus) humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being...She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her...”⁵

Ammu is not only a woman but her identity is loaded with so many determinants: she is married, married to one belonging to different community, divorced and having children.

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These make Ammu all the more vulnerable. Baby Kochamma holds the common view of the society:

“...that a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage.” (GST-45)

Absence of Sense of Belonging

This sense of belonging nowhere and possessing nothing are reiterated again and again by Chacko in his boastful assertion of “My house, my pineapples, my pickle”. He threatens Ammu to be out of his house : “Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body”(GST-225). Though Ammu is the main character in the novel, the male arrogance is visible in relation to other characters as well. Mammachi for example, is beaten regularly by her husband before Chacko interferes in the matter. Not only that, Mammachi’s violin training in Vienna was discontinued as soon as her teacher praised her talent before Pappachi. A married woman does not feel at home in his husband’s home also. Marriage becomes futile to Ammu. Looking at her photograph taken at the time of her marriage she feels disgusted:

“Looking at herself like this(in her bridal costume), Ammu’s soft mouth would twist into a small, bitter smile at the memory – not of the wedding itself so much as the fact that she had permitted herself to be so painstakingly decorated before being led to the gallows. It seemed so absurd. So futile.” (GST -43-44)

Woman as a Social Being

As a social being, Ammu’s predicament and vulnerability are even more painful. Women as a gender construction are put under some social taboos and ‘laws’ to become ‘feminine’. These taboos and laws are made sacrosanct by the male dominated society. Any sort of violation of these laws are bound to be punished. Both Ammu and Rahel fail to conform to these prescribed laws. Rahel is driven out of her school for not conforming to the socially accepted version of behaviour. Her apparently weird behaviour of hiding behind doors and deliberately colliding with others in school to see if breasts hurt, goes beyond the holiness of the Christian institution. Rahel observes:

“In that Christian institution, breasts were not acknowledged. They were not supposed to exist, and if they didn’t could they hurt?” (GST -16)

And finally when she was expelled from the school, the teachers whispered to each other: “as though she didn’t know how to be a girl”. As they go beyond the norms, Ammu and Rahel are taken to be transgressors. Ammu’s love for Velutha is the worst transgression that she commits. The age old social order is trampled. The relationship between a Syrian Christian woman and a Dalit man disrupt the existing order and notions:

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“They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. (GST-31)

At the police station, Ammu gets, from the police officer, the most humiliating experience which bruises her not just physically, but the core of her womanhood and human dignity is demolished. The helplessness of Ammu is unmistakably the predicament of the subaltern woman in the hand of administration and bureaucracy. The way Inspector Thomas Mathew behaved with Ammu is a testimony to the general view of the society towards a lonely, divorced, helpless woman; her body can easily be occupied:

“Inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton. Then tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap, Tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket.”
(GST-8)

Social Stratification and Oppression

Historically, the Dalits remain to be the most oppressed section in India. The caste based stratification of the Hindus have rendered the dalits as untouchables. Neither they, nor even their shadows, can touch the upper caste Hindus. The upper caste people treat them as sub-human beings, avoid any sort of contact with them, and if, by chance they happen to be in ‘touch’ with them (the untouchables) they need to be sanctified. The dalits belong to the lowest scale of the social order; they are the most backward class. The democratic right to equality, education, opportunity, social justice are denied to them. They are literally the downtrodden, the oppressed of the society. The dalits are truly the ‘subaltern’ who have been subjugated, silenced and effaced from the ‘elite’ discourse. Inhuman hatred, exploitation, subjugation, humiliation, social injustice and violent attack have been inflicted upon them.

The Dalit Experience

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy exposes the dalit experience through the character of Velutha in a different context. Here, Velutha is tormented not by upper caste Hindu but by people of another minority group, the Syrian Christian. In India there are much more dalits in number than the Syrian Christians. So, then, what renders the dalits the most downtrodden and oppressed? It is the construction of their identity as the untouchables, over the ages, that occupies the psyche of the people in general (among the caste Hindus as well as other well off communities).

Velutha is an untouchable Paravan. He is a carpenter and a communist activist. His life is very much like other dalits marked by discrimination, hatred, humiliation and segregation. The segregation is very clear in the novel. In Ayemenem there are two schools for the two sections of the population. The ‘village school’ was for the ‘untouchables’ and for the ‘touchables’ there was the Tender Buds Nursery school. Velutha whose grandfather embraced Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to avoid the ‘scourge of Untouchability’, remains to be an untouchable in the so-called casteless Christian community.

In the Malabar region, ‘a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas’ live, whose ancestors were converted to Christianity to get rid of untouchability. But what the novelist observes is that it was a jump ‘from the frying pan to the fire’ itself. She writes:

“They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop.” (GST-74)

Velutha is an excellent carpenter and very good at machines. But his qualities are not acceptable to the touchable workers in the factory of Mammachi. In their views, “Paravans were not *meant* to be carpenters” and to appease them, Mammachi pays less than what she pays to a touchable carpenter.

The discriminatory social laws demands a defined way of behaviour from Velutha. He is an untouchable and should behave like that. Vellya Paapen, his father is apprehensive about his future because the way Velutha talks, walks and behaves is very much unlike the untouchables. The social strictures and norms are seriously violated by his ‘illegitimate’ love for Ammu, a touchable one. Like Ammu, he is also a transgressor, and is punished for that. The plotting against him to prove him the culprit for Sophie Mol’s death, the indifferent attitude of the communist leaders towards his plight, the inhuman brutality with which the touchable policemen treat him – all point to the wretched ‘subaltern’ status of Velutha in particular, and the dalits in general. The severity of Velutha’s torture in the hands of the policemen, as it is detailed by Roy, is, hair raising:

“They (Estha and Rahel) heard the thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man’s breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib.” (GST-308)

The existence of dalits being segregated, bullied and dehumanized, remains a historical phenomenon in India. The indifferent and callous attitude of the policemen towards Velutha is narrated this way:

“If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature—had been severed long ago.”(GST -309)

Ground Reality Revealed and Exposed

The God of Small Things narrates the ground reality of the subaltern existence of the female and the dalits. They are not allowed in the existing social set up, the freedom to live as a normal human being. Various social as well as moral laws are imposed upon them, and they are expected to adhere strictly to these laws. The final chapter of the novel ‘The Cost of Living’ actually, depicts, the huge ‘cost’ of ‘living’ that Velutha, Ammu and her children

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have to pay. The only fault with them was that they wanted to 'live' according to their choice. By establishing a relationship with 'untouchable' Velutha, Ammu 'lived'. But, as it defies the social and moral code, Velutha is punished; he is killed. Rahel, after many years broods over the incident, assesses the cost of living ; she observes very succinctly, the 'price' they had to 'pay' :

“Two lives. Two children’s childhoods”. (GST-336)

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